

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF WEST VIRGINIA

CHARLESTON DIVISION

IN RE: ETHICON, INC.
 PELVIC REPAIR SYSTEMS
 PRODUCT LIABILITY LITIGATION

MDL No. 2327

THIS DOCUMENT RELATES TO:

Fran Denise Collins v. Ethicon, Inc., et al.

Civil Action No. 2:12-cv-00931

MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER
(*Daubert* Motion re: Barry Schlafstein, M.D.)

Pending before the court is the Motion to Exclude Opinions and Testimony of Barry Schlafstein, M.D. [ECF No. 93] filed by the plaintiff. The Motion is now ripe for consideration because briefing is complete.

I. Background

This action involves a Georgia plaintiff who was implanted with a mesh product manufactured by Ethicon, the Tension-free Vaginal Tape-Obturator (“TVT-O”), on December 21, 2011, at Meadows Regional Medical Center, Vidalia, Georgia, by Dr. Susanna Meredith. Am. Short Form Compl. [ECF No. 17] ¶¶ 1–12. The case resides in one of seven MDLs assigned to the Honorable Joseph R. Goodwin by the Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation concerning the use of transvaginal surgical mesh to treat pelvic organ prolapse (“POP”) and stress urinary incontinence (“SUI”). This individual case is one of a group of cases that the Clerk of the Court reassigned to me on November 22, 2016. [ECF No. 123]. In the seven MDLs, there are

approximately 29,000 cases currently pending, approximately 17,000 of which are in the Ethicon MDL, MDL 2327.

Prior to the reassignment, in an effort to efficiently and effectively manage the massive Ethicon MDL, Judge Goodwin decided to conduct pretrial discovery and motions practice on an individualized basis so that once a case is trial-ready (that is, after the court has ruled on all summary judgment motions, among other things), it can then be promptly transferred or remanded to the appropriate district for trial. To this end, Judge Goodwin ordered the plaintiffs and defendants to submit a joint list of 200 of the oldest cases in the Ethicon MDL that name only Ethicon, Inc., Ethicon, LLC, and/or Johnson & Johnson. These cases became part of a “wave” of cases to be prepared for trial and, if necessary, remanded. See Pretrial Order No. 193, *In re Ethicon, Inc. Pelvic Repair Sys. Prods. Liab. Litig.*, No. 2:12-md-02327, Aug. 19, 2015, <http://www.wvsc.uscourts.gov/MDL/ethicon/orders.html>. The plaintiff’s case was selected as an “Ethicon Wave 1 case.”

II. Legal Standard

By now, the parties should be intimately familiar with Rule 702 of the Federal Rules of Evidence and *Daubert*, so the court will not linger for long on these standards.

Expert testimony is admissible if the expert is qualified and if his or her expert testimony is reliable and relevant. Fed. R. Evid. 702; *see also Daubert*, 509 U.S. at 597. An expert may be qualified to offer expert testimony based on his or her

“knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education.” Fed. R. Evid. 702. Reliability may turn on the consideration of several factors:

- (1) whether a theory or technique can be or has been tested;
- (2) whether it has been subjected to peer review and publication; (3) whether a technique has a high known or potential rate of error and whether there are standards controlling its operation; and (4) whether the theory or technique enjoys general acceptance within a relevant scientific community.

Cooper v. Smith & Nephew, Inc., 259 F.3d 194, 199 (4th Cir. 2001) (citing *Daubert*, 509 U.S. at 592–94). But these factors are neither necessary to nor determinative of reliability in all cases; the inquiry is flexible and puts “principles and methodology” above conclusions and outcomes. *Daubert*, 509 U.S. at 595; *see also Kumho Tire Co. v. Carmichael*, 525 U.S. 137, 141, 150 (1999). Finally, and simply, relevance turns on whether the expert testimony relates to any issues in the case. *See, e.g., Daubert*, 509 U.S. at 591–92 (discussing relevance and helpfulness).

In the context of specific causation expert opinions, the Fourth Circuit has held that plaintiffs may use “a reliable differential diagnosis[, which] provides a valid foundation for an expert opinion.” *Westberry v. Gislaved Gummi AB*, 178 F.3d 257, 263 (4th Cir. 1999).

A reliable differential diagnosis typically, though not invariably, is performed after ‘physical examinations, the taking of medical histories, and the review of clinical tests, including laboratory tests,’ and generally is accomplished by determining the possible causes for the patient’s symptoms and then eliminating each of these potential causes until reaching one that cannot be ruled out or determining which of those that cannot be excluded is the most likely.

Id. at 262 (citations omitted).

Defendants, however, need not conduct a differential diagnosis to identify the specific cause of an injury because they do not bear the burden of proving causation. *See* 3 David Faigman et al. *Modern Sci. Evidence* § 21:6 (2015-2016 ed.). Indeed, a defendant's specific causation expert's testimony should not be excluded because it fails to identify the specific cause of a plaintiff's injury. *See Yang v. Smith*, 728 S.E.2d 794, 800 (Ga. Ct. App. 2012) (refusing to exclude defendant's specific causation expert testimony where that testimony did not identify an injury's specific cause because the defendant had no burden to prove the specific cause of the injury). In lieu of conducting traditional differential diagnoses, defendants may instead provide expert testimony suggesting alternative causes for the plaintiff's injury in order to rebut the plaintiff's specific causation testimony. *See Westberry*, 178 F.3d at 265 ("The alternative causes suggested by a defendant 'affect the weight that the jury should give the expert's testimony and not the admissibility of that testimony,' unless the expert can offer '*no* explanation for why she has concluded [an alternative cause offered by the opposing party] was not the sole cause.'" (citations omitted)); *see also* Faigman, *supra*, at § 21:4 ("Sometimes, the courts subtly shift the burden of production onto the defendant when determining whether the [plaintiff's] expert has done a sufficient job in ruling out other causes.").

At bottom, the court has broad discretion to determine whether expert testimony should be admitted or excluded. *Cooper*, 259 F.3d at 200.

III. Discussion


The plaintiff argues that I should exclude Dr. Schlafstein's opinion because it is based on "cherry picked" facts that render it unreliable. However, I find that Dr. Schlafstein's opinion has sufficient factual grounding to move forward. To the extent the plaintiff believes Dr. Schlafstein's opinion is lacking, she may attack it on cross-examination. The plaintiff's Motion on this point is **DENIED**, and any remaining issues are **RESERVED** for trial.

IV. Conclusion

The court **ORDERS** that the Motion to Exclude Opinions and Testimony of Barry Schlafstein, M.D. [ECF No. 93] is **DENIED in part** and **RESERVED in part**.

The court **DIRECTS** the Clerk to send a copy of this Order to counsel of record and any unrepresented party.

ENTER: December 13, 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert C. Chambers", written over a horizontal line.

ROBERT C. CHAMBERS
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE